

## Foreword

We who work at the unit, Childhood Studies, Department of Education at Gothenburg University, together with the OMEP organization (Organisation Mondiale Pour L'Éducation Préscolaire) in Sweden, feel privileged to have been involved in organizing and carrying through the study visits for colleagues in the field of early childhood education in North Carolina. Personal meetings and joint reflections are a necessary component of professional growth whether one comes from the classroom or the university. Cultural exchanges also help people to become aware and realize the importance of one's own everyday life and the work they do.

The uniqueness of Sweden's early childhood education system has much to offer others who seek to improve the quality of care and education for young children in their home countries. Six characteristics of the Swedish early childhood system identified by the study participants and outlined in this publication illustrate both the simplicity and complexity of the services we provide to our children ages 1 - 5. In Sweden we have a commitment to provide opportunities for learning and development for ALL children. To provide quality services we have developed a framework for quality that began in the early 1900s, including the preparation and ongoing education of personnel, a national curriculum to guide the development of healthy and stimulating environments and daily interactions with and among children. We believe that all children are capable, that it is important to listen to the children, to encourage active participation and exploration and to support their ability to express themselves.

The framework for quality described in The Red Thread includes state resources combined with parental contributions. Annually, Sweden spends just 1.9 % of its GNP on early childhood education; compared to countries like Holland and England which each spend 0.4 % of their GNP on services for young children. Parents pay only 11% of the total cost of preschool services for their child while English parents pay about 45% of the total cost. In addition, generous parental leave, health care and free pre-kindergarten services for 3 hours a day is provided nationwide.

Sweden not only places importance on the resources that lay the fiscal foundation for preschool services but on the

human resources impacted by the services provided. An example of the importance we place on listening to our children can be found in the actions of our Preschool Minister, Lena Hallengren. A few years ago she requested the opinion of preschoolers via drawings (with added comments from their teachers) and recordings about their preschool experiences to allow children to actively shape the services they receive.

In addition, our preschool curriculum (LpFO '98) also supports children sharing their own ideas. In the LpFO '98 the curriculum states: "The preschool should try to ensure that children develop the ability to express their thoughts and views and thus have the opportunity of influencing their own situation." As you continue your practice in early childhood education, ask yourself, what does it mean with young children's participation in their own everyday life and in their own learning – when children are two or four years of age?

The financial resources and maximum parental fee, the national preschool curriculum, the quality personnel, and access for all children to stimulating environments and learning opportunities are together parts of a larger democratic project – equality – for parents (men and women) and for all children!

For me personally, as the first chair holder in early childhood education in Sweden, and for OMEP as an organization providing opportunities for professional networking and development, it is with satisfaction I can state that there is a movement in many countries in the world towards recognizing early childhood education as a field, as important as compulsory (elementary school), where Sweden has a leading position in working towards the child's rights for a good education from the early years.

But to remind ourselves of the importance of this work we need colleagues from other cultures to discuss ideas, challenges and potential for collaboration to improve early childhood services universally. We look forward to many new study groups from North Carolina in the future!

Sincerely,  
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